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Article (Accepted Version)

Thomson, Frances (2011) The agrarian question and violence in Colombia: conflict and development. *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 11 (3). pp. 321-356. ISSN 14710358

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The Agrarian Question and Violence in Colombia: Conflict and Development

FRANCES THOMSON ·

Abstract- *This article examines connections between Colombia's internal armed conflict and agrarian questions. It pays attention to the country's specific historical trajectory of agrarian change, the violent expression of social tensions that this elicited, and the particular ways in which these dynamics were influenced by a changing global context. This analysis of the intimate ties between violent conflict and agrarian questions in Colombia, both in terms of their historical development and their contemporary manifestations, challenges popular notions of the relationship between armed conflict and development. In particular, the article contributes to a critique of the conventional version of the conflict-development nexus by illustrating ways in which the experience of capitalist development in Colombia has been violent and produced poverty.*

Key Words- agrarian question(s); Colombia; violent conflict; development

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: Thomson, F. 2011. The agrarian question and violence in Colombia: conflict and development. *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 11 (3), 321–56, **which has been published in final form at:** <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1471-0366.2011.00314.x/abstract>. **This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving. This PDF was created for self-archive in October 2015.**

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Special thanks to Renata Fitzpatrick for all her comments and support, the Global Political Economy group at the University of Sussex (especially Ben Selwyn, Samuel Knafo and Kees van der Pijl), and all the reviewers for their feedback and suggestions.

This article was originally written as an MA dissertation at the University of Sussex and was reworked within the space provided by the research group *Ética y Política* at the Universidad Autónoma de Manizales.

INTRODUCTION

Issues of land tenure have shaped Colombian history since the colonial era and continue to shape the nation's political economy today. The competing interests of the peasantry and the landed elite materialized as a result of the development of capitalism and the commercialisation of agriculture as the country became more deeply assimilated into world markets. Understanding the Colombian conflict requires an appreciation of the country's historical trajectory of agrarian change, the violent expression of social tensions in its wake, and the particular ways in which these dynamics were influenced by the changing global context.

The analysis presented here reveals that Colombia's conflict does not easily fit into any model of civil war. In particular, a deeper understanding of the intimate ties between violent conflict and agrarian questions in Colombia, both historically and in their contemporary manifestations, provides grounds for a critique of conventional notions of the conflict-development nexus. On the one hand, the common claim that 'poverty increases the likelihood of civil war' may contain an element of truth (Collier et al. 2003, 53).¹ On the other hand, this article challenges further claims made on the basis of the supposed relationship between poverty and violence, specifically, 1) that war is development in reverse and 2) that the best solution for preventing and overcoming conflict is economic growth and development. This analysis of the Colombian conflict casts doubt upon those claims by demonstrating that capitalist development can itself be violent and even produce poverty. Furthermore, the Colombian case shows how the use of violence to achieve certain ends is not confined to repressed, marginalized and poor groups, but is also used by elite classes to maintain and impose a particular development model.

The first section of the article provides a brief review of mainstream ideas about the nature and causes of civil war. It then looks at a debate that has been sidelined by the many theorists and policy makers, concerning competing versions of the conflict-development nexus. Subsequent sections challenge conventional notions of the relationship between development and violent conflict. Section two provides a theoretical framework of agrarian questions within which the case of Colombia is considered. Section three recounts the historical antecedents of the Colombian conflict and its relation to agrarian change. The fourth section of the article examines the contemporary (focusing on the Uribe era) links between agrarian questions and violence in Colombia. This segment of the article draws on government data, legislation, press releases, national and international newspaper articles, and international and local NGO reports,² in order to

¹ This popular assertion has been widely represented in many different organisations and by various influential figures. For example, in a 2002 world development summit, Michael Moore, the Director-General of the WTO at the time, stated: "poverty in all its forms is the greatest single threat to peace". At the same event, the then President of the UN General Assembly, Han Seung-Soo, said that poverty created a "breeding ground for violence" (BBC 2002).

² Please note: where sources are cited in Spanish, all translations are my own.

disclose the continuing significance of land struggles and how they are inextricably linked to capitalist development and global forces.

I- THEORIES OF CIVIL WAR AND THE CONFLICT-DEVELOPMENT NEXUS

Internal wars have dominated armed conflict since the second half of the twentieth century (UCDP 2010). Academic and policy research accordingly shifted its emphasis from interstate to intrastate war. Many analysts have reached contradictory conclusions as to the causes and nature of contemporary warfare. In this section, I explore those ideas and examine how they have been applied to the case of Colombia. Particular attention is paid to one key theme in the civil war discourse that has generated significantly less debate: the conflict-development nexus.

Theories of Civil War: A Brief Literature Review

Mary Kaldor (2007) contends that conflicts at the end of the 20th century are distinctively ‘new’ in several key ways. She claims that the lines dividing war rooted in political aims and organized crime are increasingly unclear and that even ‘internal’ conflicts are ‘transnationalized’. The victims of ‘new wars’ are more likely to be civilians than militia: modern warfare technology is used not to ‘win hearts and minds’ but to create ‘fear and terror’. For Kaldor, the use of the term ‘war’ is a deliberate way of highlighting the political character of new forms of violence. However, other new war proponents have argued that as conflicts have become increasingly ‘criminal’ they are also increasingly a-political; Enzensberger, for example, claims that ‘they are wars *about nothing at all* [...] violence has been freed from ideology’ (quoted in Kalyvas 2001, 103, emphasis in original). The implication is that while in the past, wars were propelled by the pursuit of political causes, today’s conflicts are simply meaningless violence. Kalyvas (2001) maintains that this is a ‘double mischaracterization’ based on incomplete or biased information, and that it overlooks ethnographic research on the complexities of civil war.

Similar discussions have been central to the ‘greed versus grievance’ debate. For Collier (1999), ‘narratives of grievance’ disguise ‘economic agendas’ that are advanced through civil war. This type of conflict model relies on neoclassical economic axioms and rational choice theory to explain how individuals decide whether to join a rebellion by weighing up potential costs and gains. ‘Conflict risk’ is understood to be a function of the combination of poverty (where people - it is assumed - have little to lose by entering into armed conflict) and existence of primary resource wealth (providing opportunity and incentive for gain). Collier and Hoeffler’s study based on statistical data from 78 civil conflicts between 1960 and 1999 concludes that there is ‘little evidence for grievances as a determinant of conflict’ and that the ‘greed model provides much better explanatory power’ (2002, 1). Qualitative analyses tend to produce different conclusions.

Economic opportunity is sometimes found to be an influence in determining the ‘duration, intensity and character of conflict’, but not a ‘primary cause’ of internal wars (Ballentine 2003). Other critiques stress that even poor people, who are assumed to have a lower opportunity cost in violence, have their lives to lose (Cramer 2006; Gutiérrez 2004). Another problem identified by Collier’s critics is that grievances themselves are often economic; for example, it is unclear why low income should not be considered a source of grievance. As pointed out by Gutiérrez (2004), if scarce economic opportunities are what drive rebellion, whether their activities involve looting or not, should we really call this ‘greed’?

The issue of natural resources is a further area of contention. The ‘resource curse’ is treated by some theorists as a causal explanation for conflict. Although some analyses have found that there is no correlation between the weight of primary resource exports in the GDP and likelihood of conflict, there are also studies that claim a significant relationship (Ross 2004). In contrast to ‘resource curse’ studies, others focus on how resource scarcity (e.g. water) and environmental degradation generate conflict (Maxwell 2000). There is no clear consensus in the conflict literature about the role of natural resources. Competing interests (national and international) in natural resources (whether scarce or abundant) play a key role in conflict, but what matters is not the simple existence of these resources or even dependence upon them, but rather how they are managed, how political questions of power interact with economic and material issues (Cramer 2006, 123).

Another area of research has revived a tradition from classical political theory concerned with the relationship between Liberal values (predominantly democracy and free trade) and violent conflict. Brückner and Ciccone (2007) claim that low income growth increases the probability of civil war in non-democracies, but not in countries with strong democratic institutions. While Hegre (2001) found that ‘coherent’ democracies and authoritarian states are least likely to experience civil war, while ‘intermediate regimes’ run a high risk. The ‘pacifying commerce’ thesis has also been re-established in contemporary conflict theory. Some analysts argue that there has been a decrease in the number of active internal armed conflicts in recent years that can partly be attributed to trade and globalisation, which supposedly allow people to acquire wealth through peaceful rather than coercive means (Griswold 2007). Another study finds that trade openness discourages ‘severe’ civil wars but can also create risks for smaller-scale internal conflicts (Martin et al. 2008). In any analysis of civil war, it must be taken into account that statistical studies designed to assess the relevance and impact of any particular variable such as democracy or international trade are of limited use. Cramer refers to econometrics as ‘far too crude an analytical tool’ (2003, 409). This type of approach tends to overlook the complex ways in which a variety of factors play out in the diverse contexts of armed conflict.

Colombia and Theories of Civil War

Academics and political analysts have tried to fit Colombia into one of these ‘models’ of war. For instance, the role of the cocaine industry in financing illegally armed groups has often been used to advance a ‘resource curse’ explanation. Angrist and Kugler (2008) found that rising coca prices and production in Colombia were directly linked to an upsurge in rural violence. However, the term ‘resource curse’ is questionable since it implies that the resource simply exists and is available for predation. Coca, like any other crop, must be cultivated; and therefore its’ role in the conflict can only be understood within the context of wider agrarian structures. Moreover, the resource alone explains little; armed groups existed before the cocaine industry, and rebel groups also fund themselves through racketeering and extortion, cattle theft, bank robberies and kidnapping.

For some analysts the illegal drugs industry is more than just a means of financing combat; it has become an end in itself. Collier uses Colombia as an example of a greed-based civil conflict, pointing to insurgent involvement in the drug trade as an indication of criminality (1999, 8). Francisco Gutiérrez challenges the application of the ‘greed thesis’ to the Colombian rebel groups, emphasising that the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) explicitly forbids the use of the rebellion for personal gain, so that ‘even admitting the possibility that a handful of individuals actually gets rich with the war, which until now has not been proved, the vast majority of the organization has no possibility whatsoever of doing so, *and knows it*’ (Emphasis in original 2004, 269). Moreover, if material interests were the only motivation for joining illegally armed groups, then guerrillas would be unable to compete with paramilitary organisations, which pay their combatants salaries and tolerate looting (Gutiérrez 2004, 2008). Likewise, membership in the FARC cannot be attributed to ethnic loyalty; neither guerrilla nor paramilitary groups have been ethnically homogenous, just as they have not used this type of identity politics in their narratives.³

Motivations for joining the FARC vary. Many people are drawn in by the appeal of a military lifestyle or the status and power associated with wielding a weapon. Often joining is a form of escapism from the drudgery of daily existence. Some become members under force and others are attracted by false promises, often related to economic benefits. Issues of revenge also come into play. Finally, there are those that are motivated by ‘conviction’; sometimes, but not always linked to ideology. The motivations of paramilitary recruits may be similar; however, the lack of solid information makes this a speculative claim (Gutiérrez 2008, 21-5). Once membership is obtained, ‘mobilization mechanisms’ certainly differ: Gutiérrez asserts that ‘while the paramilitary rely heavily on individualistic mechanisms and economic selective incentives, the FARC is based on collective, non-economic ones’ (2008, 25). There are also clear documented differences between the social makeup of armed groups. The FARC, throughout its hierarchy, is largely constituted by

³ The only example of this type of armed mobilisation in Colombia is the indigenous guerrilla group, Quintin Lame.

peasants with low levels of education and is more likely to have female members. Paramilitary groups, on the other hand, tend to be led by wealthy rural figures (such as cattle ranchers) or narcotraffickers, while the middle and upper ranks often include ex-military, and the lower ranks are likely to be made up of ex-gang members and manual labourers. None of these attributes are captured by purely economic models of armed conflict (Gutiérrez 2008).

Colombia might also be considered a ‘new war’ considering the role of global commodity markets in its financing, the apparent blurring of the criminal and the political, and the high number of civilian deaths. However, the latter has been, in large part, a consequence of the use of terror against the civilian population by paramilitary forces; a long-standing counterinsurgency strategy influenced by U.S. military doctrine. Doug Stokes (2003) challenges the post-Cold War discontinuity thesis that underlies the notion of ‘new wars’. He argues, instead, that there is clear continuity of US foreign policy in Colombia: the provision of military aid has consistently been guided by the objective of maintaining the hegemony of US interests in the region whether under the guise of Cold War politics, the war on drugs, or the war on terror. Another challenge to the new war thesis is presented by Gutiérrez who argues that ‘the traditional rural violence of the late 1950s resembles much more the ‘new wars’ description than the contemporary conflict’ (2006, 142). Finally, the continued targeting of left-wing academics, journalists, trade unionists and social leaders by state and paramilitary forces forcefully undermines the idea that the conflict has become a-political.

The violence in Colombia is not a simple case of one group of armed actors against another. High levels of generalized crime, guerrilla attacks against both infrastructure and civilians, human rights abuses committed by the military and the paramilitaries, disputes between drug gangs, and massive human displacement; all contribute to a mixture of violence that does not fit into the traditional definition of civil war. For example, the ‘casualty threshold’ definition that tallies the number of ‘battle-related deaths’ in order to determine when a violent situation can be labelled ‘war’,⁴ excludes many of the types of violence described above.⁵ Moreover, under such a definition, volatile statistics might lead one to believe that Colombia has had various distinct civil

⁴ This depends on the classification system used, and ranges from between 25 to 1,000 mortalities per year. Some dispute the classification of the Colombian conflict as a ‘civil war’ on this basis. However, according to data provided by CERAC, Colombia’s internal conflict meets the quantitative criteria for it to be labelled a ‘civil war’ because between 1988 and 2002, conflict-related deaths did not drop below the 1,000 mark and rose considerably in the late 1990s, reaching over 4,000 in 2002. Restrepo et al. argue that other datasets may underestimate the severity of the Colombian conflict. For example, the UCDP dataset only counts ‘battle-deaths’, more specifically those killed in combat between government forces and guerrilla groups; it excludes paramilitary related violence and attacks on civilians. In contrast, CERAC includes attacks on civilians perpetrated by both guerrillas and paramilitaries, in addition to battle-deaths (Restrepo et al. 2006).

⁵ Even given the inclusion of assassinations or massacres carried out by illegally armed groups against civilians (see footnote above), these classifications still leave aside other elements of the conflict that are arguably not independent phenomena, such as politically motivated assassinations carried out by hired-gunmen, or violence against civilians by government armed forces (see, for example, the case of the *falsos positivos*: Semana 2009a).

wars.⁶ This is misleading, since the contemporary Colombian violence cannot be disconnected from that of the 1990s, 1980s or even 1950s. Arguably, there is a certain degree of continuity in the Colombian conflict as well as discontinuity, represented as different but not isolated phases. The many forms of violence in Colombia, which are not all officially dubbed ‘war-related’, are not isolated problems; they are interlinked in complex ways. For these reasons, I adopt the term ‘violent conflict’ rather than the more problematic ‘civil war’.

The Conventional Conflict-Development Nexus

Analyses of the Colombian conflict have played a key role in challenging the various competing theories in conflict studies. However, there is one key theme that has received much less critical treatment in dominant discourse: the conflict-development nexus. The World Bank Policy Research Report, *Breaking the Conflict Trap: Civil War and Development Policy*, is representative of the conventional understanding of the relationship between violent conflict and development. The report has two principle claims: that ‘civil war is development in reverse,’ and that development is an ‘effective instrument for conflict prevention’ (Collier et al. 2003, 1). According to the report, the countries with ‘the highest risk’ of civil war are the ‘marginalized developing countries’ with low and declining per-capita incomes and growth, characterized by inequitable distribution and dependence on primary commodities. While natural resources provide finances for illegally armed groups, low incomes provide ‘a pool of impoverished and disaffected young men who can be cheaply recruited by entrepreneurs of violence’ (Collier et al. 2003, 4). All of these factors are assumed to be a consequence of poor policies, governance and institutions.

The most common explanations for civil war, such as ethnic and religious rivalry or colonial legacies, it is emphasized, are not supported by the report’s statistical evidence. Such grievances are widespread and do not consistently produce violence: ‘although political conflict is common to all societies, civil war is concentrated in the lowest-income countries’ (Collier et al. 2003, 91). While it is acknowledged that ‘partial’ democracies may be more susceptible to war, the authors insist that democracy in low income countries does not guarantee against conflict. Having discarded the explanatory power of a long list of factors, it is concluded that ‘the key root cause of conflict is the failure of economic development’ (Collier et al. 2003, 53).

The version of the conflict-development nexus presented in this World Bank Report has become a key paradigm of mainstream thinking in both development and conflict studies fields. This consensus is reflected in the ‘Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development’,

⁶ For example, the epoch known as *La Violencia* (usually dated 1948-1958) is often treated as an event which is separate from the present-day conflict, but such separation is problematic, as demonstrated in the historical review in section III of this article.

signed by 42 countries, committing to support ‘efforts to integrate armed violence reduction and conflict prevention programmes into national, regional and multilateral development frameworks’ (2006, 1). In spite of – or even because of - its widespread influence and acceptance, the conclusions of this report warrant examination.

Cramer’s Conflict-Development Nexus

One of the few to scrutinize the conventional conflict-development model is Cramer, who challenges the claim that ‘war is development in reverse’ and puts forward an alternative supposition: progress and development require ‘momentous transitions’ that are typically ‘brutal’ (2006, 44-5). The view that war is entirely negative, he argues, can ‘only be sustained by a form of historical amnesia’ because ‘Western and more or less liberal civilisation had violence at its foundation, in war, slavery, imperial adventure and primitive accumulation’ (2006, 9, 43). For Cramer contemporary conflicts are best understood as manifestations of the ‘contradictions’ of ‘late transitions to capitalism’ (2006, 13). The transition to capitalism is often violent for various reasons. In the context of rapid social change there is an opportunity to contest the ‘terms of accumulation’, the institutions that establish these terms, and how wealth is distributed. The development of capitalism depends on the establishment of private property rights that are by their very nature exclusionary and therefore likely to generate conflict. One of the key elements of the violent transition to capitalism is primitive accumulation, which Cramer defines as a ‘twin process of forceful asset accumulation and displacement of people’ (2006, 217). Finally, international factors (fluctuations in global commodity markets, the presence of multinational companies or foreign aid agencies, the influence of international financial institutions, military aid or intervention, etc.) may further fan the flames of violent conflict (Cramer 2006, 215-6).

Cramer’s notion of violent conflict, based on Marx’s ‘tragic view of history’, like Liberalism, is rooted in a belief in progress, but from one standpoint violence is enabling and from the other it is disabling. Cramer himself recognizes that there is a danger that the argument could be used to romanticize, justify or encourage violence and war in the name of progress (2006, 47). He maintains that ‘violent transitions’ to capitalism have no definite outcome and that there may be ‘no end in sight’; he thereby avoids professing that violent conflict is necessary or positive and also warns the reader against the temptation of trying to distinguish between ‘good and bad wars’ or those that promote ‘progressive’ change and those that are ‘negative and destructive’ even in their long-term consequences (2006, 48, 238, 284). However, he fails to address the notion of progress itself. Cramer uses the terms development and progress interchangeably; defining development as industrialisation and the spread of capitalism (2006, 254). Therefore, it can be deduced that for Cramer the spread of capitalism is favourable for the ‘improvement of the human condition’ and the

‘advance of society’. But determining what is progressive involves value-judgements and normative claims.

A few examples from the case of Colombia examined in this paper reveal how capitalist development is not necessarily ‘progressive’ from the point of view of all the stakeholders. While the establishment of mega agro-industrial projects may be judged by some as ‘progress’ since they generate jobs and foreign exchange earnings, for the communities violently displaced from their land, these agro-industry projects represent devastation. Similarly, from the point of view of a conservationist, the destruction of biodiversity that precedes the imposition of monoculture plantations does not fall into a category of ‘progressive change’. Finally, some people may claim that the growth of the cocaine industry in Colombia, despite the violence associated with it, is progressive since it generates wealth that is reinvested in other legal or legitimate ventures. Thus, recognising that *capitalist* development is a violent process is not the same as claiming that violent conflict associated with capitalist development is part of progress; therefore, this paper replaces the normative term ‘progress’ with ‘capitalist development’.

Colombia and the Competing Conflict-Development Theses

Initially, a few basic points can be made regarding the conflict-development nexus in Colombia. First, poverty is clearly a key factor in explaining violence; however, recognising that poverty plays a role in generating conflict does not imply that conflict should be resolved and prevented through ‘rapid growth and integration into global markets’, as the World Bank (WB) Report suggests (Collier et al. 2003, 101). In fact, poverty may be generated in processes of capitalist development such as primitive accumulation as will be discussed later. This produces a cycle (confounding the logic of the conventional conflict-development nexus): capitalist development is a violent process that causes poverty and inequality, which fuel further violence. Poverty is of course, not the only factor fuelling violence; to assume this is equivalent to stating that the poor are the most violent actors in a conflict, which is not the case. Both elite groups and marginalized or ‘poor’ sections of society have used violence to pursue particular ends.

Second, contrary to the implication of the hypothesis presented in the World Bank Report, in Colombia, a protracted violent conflict sits comfortably with a history of almost unbroken economic growth,⁷ and often incidences of intensifying violence coincide with high growth rates. In his analysis of the Colombian conflict, Richani challenges the view that war has exclusively negative impacts on the economy, arguing that ‘markets of violence- like all other markets- present opportunities for the formation, accumulation, redistribution and investment of capital’ (2005,115).

⁷ Colombia’s average annual GDP growth for 1987-1997 was 4.0 and between 1997 and 2007 was 3.0 with highs of 6.9 and 7.5 in 2006 and 2007 (World Bank 2008).

The 'conflict trap' in which Colombia is stuck has little to do with declining or stagnant economic growth. In fact, violence has played an important role in capital accumulation in Colombia, as will be discussed in sections III and IV of this article.

Third, Colombia has one of the highest levels of inequality in Latin America: 20% of Colombians claim 60% of national income (World Bank 2009) and this is certainly an important dynamic in the conflict. However, linking economic inequality to violent conflict is not enough. In fact, there is no clear causal statistical relationship between measures of income inequality and the incidence of civil war. This does not imply that inequality is irrelevant to our understanding of conflict; as pointed out by Cramer 'it is about visible and felt inequalities at the local level rather than the extremes of the Gini coefficient and the ratio between earnings of the richest and poorest quintiles of the population' (2003, 405). It is necessary to examine the 'social, political, cultural and historical' facets, as well as the economic aspects of inequality (Cramer 2003, 408-9), to examine how inequality is created, maintained and contested through violent means and how it is shaped by capitalist development. It is important to understand how inequality frames 'collective identities' upon which mobilisation is based, such as identification with a particular social class: e.g. peasants and landless labourers versus traditional landowning class and agribusiness elite.

Finally, Colombia (at least superficially) has a well-functioning government; another atypical feature of conflict states. The WB Report supposes that 'poor policies, governance and institutions' create the conditions for a high risk of violent conflict or civil war. But Colombia has a reputation as a neoliberal role model and a history of close cooperation with international financial agencies, particularly the World Bank. Government institutions and bodies provide public services and perform bureaucratic duties, and various political parties compete in electoral processes; thus, Colombia is not usually classified as a 'failed state'. Nevertheless, it was precisely the absence of state presence in certain areas of the country, particularly agricultural frontier zones of peasant colonisation, which explains the emergence of armed groups. According to Sánchez, 'both guerrillas and Self-Defense groups explain their origins in almost identical terms: the incapacity of the State to fulfil specific economic, social and cultural obligations in the case of the guerrillas, and, in the case of the paramilitaries, the State's inability to carry out the essential function of the modern nation, that of guaranteeing public security' (2001, 25). The Colombian government has tended to either flout its responsibility for resolving social conflicts, leaving them to be settled by illegally armed groups, or to respond itself using military repression. This has been visible in its handling of the agrarian question.

Colombian policy has often been based on the assumptions of the conventional development-conflict consensus described above. Both national and international forces have taken steps to integrate security and development policy. President Uribe's 'National Development Plan' reflects

this as do international aid agency development programmes. Many security-development projects are rurally based and relate directly to the government's treatment of the agrarian problem and the violence it has engendered. At the same time, the history of the Colombian conflict attests to Cramer's opposing notion of the conflict-development nexus. As will be shown, violence is very much rooted in struggles over the 'terms of accumulation', in the agrarian sector in particular. Furthermore, the conflict has been exacerbated by the particular ways in which Colombia was integrated into the global capitalist system and the 'contradictions' that 'late transitions' entail.

II- CAPITALIST DEVELOPMENT AND AGRARIAN QUESTIONS

Colombia's protracted internal conflict has explicit ties with the nation's transition to capitalism and accompanying agrarian questions. It is not unusual for agrarian transitions to be conflictual, and yet for the most part, with a few notable exceptions such as the work of Cristóbal Kay (2007), contemporary conflict studies have ignored this issue in their analyses. This section provides a brief explanation of what is meant by the term '*capitalist* development', followed by an overview of some key themes in agrarian political economy. These ideas have a strong resonance in the subsequent sections of the article which examine the specific case of Colombia.

Capitalist Development

The World Bank and other international institutions fail to acknowledge that development is shaped by a global capitalist logic that is not necessarily peaceful. In fact, mainstream development and conflict literature mostly ignore the concept of 'capitalism' outright. In overlooking the development of capitalism, these analyses arguably have only a partial view of the dynamic processes that influence violent conflict. Using Ellen Wood's definition, 'capitalism is a system in which goods and services, down to the most basic necessities of life, are produced for profitable exchange, where even human labour-power is a commodity for sale in the market, and where all economic actors are dependent on the market' (2002, 2). Capitalism engenders an insatiable drive for capital accumulation through production for the market, governed by the 'fundamental rules' of 'competition and profit-maximization'. The entire organisation of social life is subject to these 'imperatives', as Wood calls them, which are rationalized using notions of 'productivity' and 'improvement', both ultimately measured in terms of exchange value or profit (2002, 109-15).

While the term 'capitalism' does not form part of the World Bank lexicon, this is clearly the type of development (based on the expansion of markets, private property, production for profit, and so on) that the institution envisages. The policies advocated in the World Bank's 2008 World Development Report, dedicated exclusively to agriculture, are designed, argue Akram-Lodhi, Kay, and Borras, to 'widen the scope of already established and prevailing capitalist social property

relations by broadening and deepening the[ir] sway [...] exposing an even greater number of people to the market imperative' (2009, 218). In Colombia, this process of 'broadening and deepening' the capitalist 'market imperative' in the agrarian sector has been particularly violent.

In challenging the conventional conflict-development nexus, the main argument set out in this article, that capitalist development can be both violent and produce poverty, rests upon an original observation of Karl Marx. The establishment of private property and a labour force dependent on the market for its subsistence, both necessary for the development of capitalism, are rooted, according to Marx, in 'the primitive accumulation'. In Marx's own words: 'The expropriation of the agricultural producer, of the peasant, from the soil, is the basis of the whole process', while 'the history of this, their expropriation, is written in the annals of mankind in the letters of blood and fire' (1999, 365). Just as capitalist accumulation requires and creates a society dependent on the market for its reproduction, it also requires and creates a 'relative surplus-population' or 'disposable industrial reserve army' (1999, 352). As accumulation proceeds, the reserve army of labour and consequently poverty expands: 'capital increases its supply of labour more quickly than its demand for labourers' (1999, 354). Fundamental to the 'General Law of Capitalist Accumulation', Marx writes, is 'an accumulation of misery, corresponding with accumulation of capital'; thus 'pauperism forms a condition of capitalist production and of the capitalist development of wealth' (1999, 362, 360). In addition to drawing links between capitalist development, violence, and poverty, Marx's analysis directs us to the centrality of the agrarian sector in this process.

Agrarian Questions

Marx's writings on agrarian transformation in the English countryside provided the foundations for agrarian political economy as a field of scholarship. In the late nineteenth century, Engels, in his study of what he called the 'peasant question', observed that in most of Europe (except for England and Prussia) capitalism had not yet eliminated the peasantry as an important social and political force. Socialist parties therefore had to consider how to gain support in the countryside; hence the original agrarian question (AQ) was predominantly a political question (Byres 1991, 6-8). Kautsky and Lenin focused more on explaining how capitalism takes root in the countryside or the 'emergence of agrarian capital and rural wage labour' and the different forms or paths agrarian transformation can take; what Bernstein has distinguished as the 'production' component of the AQ (Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2009a, 19-20). Among the wide diversity of possible paths, Lenin identified two key contrasting trajectories of agrarian capitalist development: the landlord or junker path ('capitalism from above') and the peasant path ('capitalism from below') represented by Prussia and America respectively. The junker path is essentially the 'reactionary' transformation of

feudal landlords into agrarian capitalists, while the peasant path is constituted by the gradual ‘differentiation of the peasantry into agrarian capital and labour’ (Bernstein 2009b, 56-9).

T. J. Byres (1991) identified a third variation of the AQ in Preobrazhensky's study of the role of surplus transfers from the agricultural sector to industry in the specific context of developing Soviet socialism. This ‘component’ of the AQ is sometimes referred to as the ‘accumulation problematic’ (Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2009a, 19). Byres’ own question also examines the contribution of agriculture to industrialisation and the different ‘paths of agrarian transition’ through which this can be achieved. He argued that the AQ ‘may be partly, and even fully, resolved, without the dominance of capitalist relations of production in the countryside’ (1991, 12). Thus, for Byres, capitalist development does not necessarily entail the dissolution of the peasantry as orthodox Marxists frequently assert. ‘Successful capitalist industrialization’, he argued, ‘is conceivable with *reproduction of the peasantry* [...] with that of family-producers, or petty commodity producers, as opposed to capitalist farmers and wage labour’ (1991, 12, emphasis in original).

In his analysis of the agrarian question in Latin America, Alain de Janvry (1981) identifies what he calls ‘socially disarticulated accumulation’ in which returns to capital are not strongly linked to returns to labour as in the instance of ‘export-enclave economies’ where the market for increased productivity is not created via rising wages, but found abroad. Under these circumstances, growth and development of the productive forces are not immediately tied to the well-being of the masses. In a ‘socially disarticulated economy’, proletarianisation supports the reduction of labour costs, but not necessarily the creation of a larger home market. Paradoxically, wages are suppressed not only because of proletarianisation, but also because of its incompleteness: ‘Labour costs can be further reduced by perpetuating the subsistence economy that partially assumes the cost of maintaining and reproducing the labour force’ (De Janvry 1981, 36). De Janvry calls this ‘functional dualism’, a system in which the coexistence of modern and traditional modes of production, characterized by the prevalence of a semi-proletariat class, serves rather than restricts surplus accumulation. Nevertheless, De Janvry rejects the claims of the Russian populist Chayanov and like-minded theorists who assert the viability of the survival of peasant production in the form of small family farming; he claims instead that the subsistence economy and the peasantry will eventually and inevitably dissolve (1981, 95-106).

In clear contrast, McMichael’s conception of the AQ is rooted in ‘the terrain of post-developmentalism’, which challenges the industrial and productivist paradigms and rejects ‘the assumption that the assault on rural cultures is inevitable or desirable’ (1997, 648). McMichael’s AQ is framed by ‘food regime analysis’, which seeks to understand how agriculture and more specifically food production and consumption shape and are shaped by specific economic-political

configurations in the history of world capitalism (McMichael 2009b). Under the current food regime, countries from the global North dump subsidized low-priced staple goods in developing nations. This, combined with the promotion of a new economic strategy based on agro-industrial exports within a global system controlled by large corporations has generated an 'agrarian crisis in the global South' (McMichael 2009a, 292-3). The generalized response to the environmental and social crises caused by the 'corporate food regime' is a new form of rural resistance: the diverse and yet unified 'food sovereignty movement' seeks to resist and challenge the commodification of land and food, proposing 'an alternative modernity' (McMichael 2009a, 307).

Like McMichael, Farshad Araghi (2009), argues for a world historical perspective of the AQ which he also ties into the food regime concept. A global food regime first emerged, he argues, during the era of 'colonial-liberal globalism', was interrupted by the period of 'long national developmentalism' (1917-1973), and then reignited in the era of 'neoliberal globalism' that followed. For Araghi, the long development era, defined by nationalist and reformist sentiment, represents an 'exceptional phase' in capitalist history; he sees the current era of 'neoliberal globalism' as a continuation of the 'colonial-liberal globalism' of the 19th century. The contemporary 'enclosure food regime' is partially upheld, he argues, by the WTO Agreement on Agriculture which, as McMichael indicated, allows the USA and Europe to foist agricultural surpluses of cheap subsidized goods on developing countries. At the same time, the Agreement demands that these countries remove state support programs and deregulate their agrarian sectors. The result has been a 'massive process of dispossession by displacement of the world's peasantries' which has produced a gigantic 'reserve army of migratory labour' (Araghi 2009, 112;134;118-120).

For Henry Bernstein, the classical agrarian question of capital has been rendered obsolete, at least from a worldwide perspective, as a result of globalization: 'for capital on a global scale, the definitive questions of continuously raising the productivity of labour in farming, the production of cheap food staples, and the agrarian sources of industrial accumulation have been resolved' (2009a, 250). At the same time globalization engenders a 'new agrarian question of labour' rooted in 'the underlying contradiction of a world capitalist system that promotes the formation of a world proletariat but cannot accommodate a generalized living wage' (Arrighi and Moore quoted in: Bernstein 2004, 204). This 'crisis of reproduction' and the related 'fragmentation of classes of labour' explain, he argues, the resurgence of land struggles and agrarian populism (2009a, 254).

According to Akram-Lodhi and Kay (2009b) the agrarian question in the contemporary era of neoliberal globalisation continues to be constituted by the three classic elements: production, accumulation, and politics. Land is central to all three of these elements (Akram-Lodhi, Kay and Borras 2009). In the current era, the control of land is shaped by what the authors call 'neoliberal agrarian restructuring', a process that diminishes the role of the state and expands the role of the

market in rural societies. The propagation of land markets ensures that allocation is determined by the capitalist logic of competition and profit-maximization. Access to land is a priority for the growing global agro-export industry which as it expands its activities intensifies the bifurcation of agrarian space into 'export oriented' and 'peasant producer' subsectors. This process has tended to either 'reinforce' or 'resurrect' unequal land access and exclusionary agrarian structures (Akram-Lodhi, Kay and Borras 2009).

Relevance of Agrarian Questions to the Colombian Conflict: An Overview

Colombia's integration into world markets during the era of 'colonial-liberal globalism', as Araghi calls it, kicked off a period of rapid agrarian change. Struggles over competing visions of agrarian development, to use Lenin's terms: the junker or landlord versus farmer-peasant path, have been articulated through violence. New economic opportunities furnished by a global food regime encouraged the formation of commercial agriculture and with it the violent dispossession of the peasantry who in turn fought for autonomous inclusion in the accumulation process. At the same time, socio-economic pressures in the agrarian sector, particularly food insecurity, led to contradictory policies that encouraged peasant production without actually supporting its development. The dominance of the export sector rendered a strong interest in creating and maintaining a flexible and low cost labour force, reflecting De Janvry's notion of socially disarticulated accumulation. Repressive responses to pacific mobilisation contributed to the consolidation of armed resistance.

Early industrial development depended to a great extent on the foreign exchange earnings generated by primary commodity exports, particularly coffee. Agriculture continues to play an important role in accumulation; however, in recent years, its role has been less as a form of support for urban industries and more in its own right, as evidenced by the government's promotion of agro-export business as key to the country's economic success, a trend observed by McMichael. The enduring weight of the agrarian sector in the national economy accounts for unrelenting rural violence. The continued centrality of land access in capital accumulation, underscored by Akram-Lodhi, Kay and Borras, is vital to understanding the motives behind massive and ongoing violent displacement.

The ties between the global food regime and social crises in the global South (as analyzed by Araghi and McMichael) are manifest in Colombia. The dedication of vast tracts of land to cattle grazing and export-crops exacerbated spiralling food prices and increased both export and import dependency, making the economy vulnerable to the volatility of international commodity markets. The hasty expansion, following liberalisation, of imports of subsidized goods such as wheat and cotton ruined many domestic producers, and arguably this was not unrelated to the impressive

growth of illicit crops during the same period. The formation of the cocaine industry in Colombia, which transformed armed conflict, has patent ties to the configuration of agrarian change.

Government policy has tended to favour mechanized commercial agriculture and a strong livestock sector, undermining smallholder production while at the same time limiting employment opportunities in rural areas. The aforementioned economic or market mechanisms of dispossession combined with violent extra-economic mechanisms have created, to use Araghi's expression, a 'massive reserve army of migratory labour'. Many *campesinos* or peasants have flocked to the agricultural frontiers in search of employment in coca production or in an attempt to re-establish as independent producers, and in the same areas, armed groups have attempted to fill the void left by an absent state. Others have become un/underemployed urban slum dwellers, likely victims of the cities' swelling crime networks. In clear echo of Bernstein's 'new agrarian question of labour', rural change in Colombia has created 'fragmented classes of labour' facing a general 'crisis of reproduction'. The pertinent unanswered question is whether future responses to this deepening crisis will strengthen pacific resistance, along the lines described by McMichael, or degenerate into more violence whether criminal or organised. Underlying this question is yet another unresolved issue: the plausibility of the continued existence of smallholders in a capitalist world. Both Byres and McMichael, though in very different ways, suggest that there are alternatives to fight for. From this brief overview, then, it is clear that the agrarian question(s) are extremely relevant to understanding the Colombian conflict.

III- AGRARIAN CHANGE AND THE COLOMBIAN CONFLICT

This section sketches the historical trajectory of violent conflict in Colombia and its links to changing agrarian questions and the penetration of the global forces of capitalism in the countryside. The nature of rural conflict in Colombia differs greatly across space and time, including landowner-tenant struggles on traditional *latifundio*, clashes with foreign agribusiness and mining companies, the mobilization of indigenous groups, the bloodshed that interlocks with the colonization of the agricultural frontier, repression and resistance of rural wage labourers, and the violent usurpation of peasant land for commercial projects. Although the many historical-geographical variations of agrarian violence warrant close examination, an in depth study of these is beyond the scope of this article.⁸ Even so, it is possible to identify a broad tendency in which capitalist development and new opportunities for accumulation have provoked social conflicts articulated through violence: as in coffee cultivation in the central Andean zone in the early 20th century, the long history of banana plantations in coastal areas, sugar cane production in the Cauca Valley, the expansion of coca crops into the agricultural frontier since the 1980s, or the recent

⁸ For a detailed study of the different regional expressions of land struggles in Colombia, see: Reyes 2009.

proliferation of palm oil across different regions. What follows provides a glimpse into the country's complex violent past; this overview is intended to convey the close ties between agrarian change and violent conflict in Colombia.

Agrarian Change and Conflict at the Turn of the 20th Century

Agrarian structures in Colombia are rooted in the nation's colonial history. When the conquistadors arrived in the 1500s, large landholdings and rights over the labour and surplus of the native people were granted to settlers by the colonial authorities. For over four centuries, legal conventions relating to land tenancy did not change; the only officially recognized titles were those that succeeded the originals granted by the Spanish Crown. The *hacienda* (large estate) system, which continued to dominate social, political and economic life after independence, was a patent heir of colonial institutions. The first real challenge to traditional agrarian structures surfaced in the mid-late 19th century: colonization of the agricultural frontier intensified during this period, partially due to the impulse of new opportunities presented by the emerging coffee export market. Tenants and sharecroppers attempting to establish themselves as a free peasantry competed with businessmen and large landowners over territory. Like earlier colonisation waves, this was a process fraught with violence (Reyes 2009, 23-25).

The foreign exchange earnings generated by coffee exports spurred economic development, fomenting a gradual integration of the domestic market. The industry driving the process was concentrated in the Andean zone, one of the key areas of peasant colonisation. Thus coffee production was sustained by both peasant producers on *minifundio* or small plots mostly located on the mountain slopes and large-scale cultivation on the *latifundios* that tend to dominate the flatlands of the valleys and plateaus. The independent involvement of the peasants in the accumulation process threatened the status of the landlords who attempted to maintain their monopoly over agrarian structures. The peasants, in turn, were ever more resistant to their subordination (Zamosc 1986, 11-12). Many *colonos* who were sent to open the frontiers for commercial coffee plantations began refusing to hand over land after clearing it, while sharecroppers and renters refused to comply with traditional obligations within the *haciendas*. The loss of social control combined with the 'inability to compete with the advantages of the peasant economy' culminated in 'the final crisis of the haciendas' (Fajardo 1983, 26).

The rapid integration of the agricultural sector into global markets or what McMichael (2009b) defines as the first global food regime (1870-1930) played a key role in destabilizing archaic agrarian structures. In the first three decades of the 20th century the value of both exports and imports more than quadrupled. While the coffee-export industry of the central Andean zone was principally an autonomous venture, foreign investment projects focused on facilitating cacao,

tobacco, and banana exports dominated the coastal region of Colombia. The US-owned United Fruit Company (UFCO) quickly monopolized the banana sector, investing in ports, roads and irrigation systems in the region. It came to own 60,000 hectares of land, benefiting from government concessions, the violent dispossession of peasant *colonos*, and the takeover of property lost as a result of defaults on credits provided by the firm. The government's extensive support for the company was dramatised by the 'banana massacre' of 1928 in which the military opened fire on striking UFCO employees. US hegemony was swiftly putting down roots in Colombia's political economy: the value of North American investments, mostly in agro-export projects and petroleum and gold extraction, rose from 4 million USD in 1913 to 250 million in 1929 (Fajardo 1983, 32-39).

In the 1920s the agrarian question, for the first time, was on the national political agenda. Industrialists demanded action, complaining that high food costs translated into high labour costs were slowing down accumulation. The 'emergency' measures taken in 1926 that temporarily lowered tariff walls were met with strong resistance from landowners. Rising imports combined with a fall in international coffee prices led to growing deficits. Meanwhile, agrarian conflict had reached new proportions. Tenants on the traditional *haciendas* were becoming increasingly defiant. The emerging rural proletariat rallied for better wages and working conditions. As land values appreciated, the *latifundistas* attempted to extend their territorial control, expelling the *colonos* who had settled in fallow areas. Many peasants formed 'self defence' communities as a means of protecting themselves from landlords' militias and the threat of eviction. The number of agrarian unions or peasant leagues mushroomed as a result of the formation of opposition parties such as the Socialist Revolutionary Party (1926), the Communist Party (1930), and the Leftist Revolutionary Union or UNIR (1933), which got involved in uniting and mobilizing peasants, rural day labourers, and indigenous groups (Zamosc 1986, 12-3; Fajardo 1983, 38-40; Galli 1981, 50-1).

The 1930s marked a growing interest in a 'new model' of development in Colombia. Some of the more 'progressive' elements of the ruling classes proposed a shift away from reliance on primary commodity exports to something akin to import substitution industrialisation based on strengthening the manufacturing sector and enlarging the home market. The decade began with the election of the Liberal party which, breaking almost 50 years of Conservative rule, passed legislation establishing protectionist tariffs and the rights of workers to form unions. Two concerns were central to the national development debates. First, how (production AQ) the agricultural sector could best provide low priced food for the expanding urban population and cheap inputs for industry (accumulation AQ). Second, the urgent need to contain explosive rural conflicts (politics AQ). However, more radical policy objectives were limited by the political influence of agro-exporting interest groups and traditional *latifundio* classes (Fajardo 1983, 47). The Colombian experience of developmentalism would also be constrained by its strong ties to the USA, which

made it largely an example of what Araghi calls ‘Western-oriented, market-led national developmentalisms’ as opposed to ‘socialist or state-led’ versions (Araghi 2009, 123-4).

Elected in 1934, President López Pumarejo argued that necessary changes would either come about through ‘agrarian reform or violent revolution’ (Hirschman 1963, 142). Law 200 of 1936 was the first serious attempt to organize land ownership since colonial times. The objective was to modernize the agrarian sector and encourage production; thus, the law stated that ‘ownership exists in favour of those who occupy the land and make economic use of it’ (Dix 1967, 88). The net effect of the reform was to produce further chaos. In many regions, violent conflicts erupted as landlords scrambled to evict tenants and squatters, which instead of increasing agricultural output, in many cases provoked the conversion of large estates into cattle pastures. The ‘land judges’ responsible for mediating disputes tended to rule in favour of fellow elites, leaving the *latifundios* largely intact (Richani 2002, 19-20). Moreover, many *hacendados* used the reform as an opportunity to extend their territorial claims; acquiring private property rights over public or communal lands (Reyes 2009, 25). Perhaps for this reason, Sánchez and Meertens read the law as ‘a landowner solution to the agrarian problem, based on gradually transforming latifundistas into capitalist entrepreneurs’ (2001, 11). Even so, members of the traditional ruling classes felt threatened: anti-reformist sentiment was strong.

When López was re-elected in 1942, he was pressured to undo many of the changes established just six years earlier. The new Law 100 of 1944 ‘defined the rights and obligations of tenants in a way that secured landlords’ control of the land’ (Richani 2002, 22). By prohibiting the planting of perennials by a tenant or a sharecropper without permission from the landlord, the potential for land redistribution was undermined, since this demonstrated the long term activity required to apply for a title. At the same time, preventing the peasantry from cultivating coffee limited their independent participation in the accumulation process (Dix 1967, 94). Dissatisfaction with the conservatism of the ruling class was reflected in the rapid popularity gained by Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, a political outsider who appealed to both urban labour and the peasantry with populist and reformist rhetoric. Gaitán was assassinated on April 9th of 1948, one year after being appointed leader of the Liberal party. Massive urban riots followed, taking the lives of several thousand people (Sánchez and Meertens 2001, 11-3).

Although rural violence had accelerated years earlier, Gaitán’s murder is often cited as the pivotal moment that unleashed Colombia’s so called civil war.⁹ *La Violencia* was concentrated in the Andean coffee producing regions, and was responsible for over 200,000 deaths and the displacement of approximately 2 million people (Reyes 2009, 24). The early years of *La Violencia* were dominated by bipartisan violence. The ruling Conservative party used police and military

⁹ Exact dates of *La Violencia* are highly contested by Colombian historians.

forces to terrorize liberals and communists, while *gamonales* or powerful landowners/local political bosses used clientelist structures in mobilising peasants to persecute supporters of the opposing factions. Many peasants fled the onslaught and joined existing and newly formed armed resistance communities. Gradually the violence became increasingly class based; pitting landlords against peasants. The elite recognized that it was in their interests that the conflict be curbed. Thus, both Conservative and traditional elements of the Liberal party supported a military coup in 1953. Lieutenant General Rojas Pinilla declared amnesty and over 10,000 guerrillas demobilized. When a few groups refused to disarm, Rojas instigated a massive counterinsurgency offensive that defined the 'second phase' of *La Violencia*. Rojas soon began to construct his own political project involving an alliance between the masses and the military. The populist threat pushed the ruling classes to unite, forming the 'National Front' in which the two traditional parties agreed to share power. In 1958 Alberto Lleras Camargo became the first unity leader. *La Violencia* had formally ended, but this was actually the beginning of a new chapter of the conflict (Dix 1967; Henderson 2001; Sánchez and Meertens 2001).

During this epoch of intense violence, the Colombian economy did not 'retreat into subsistence activities' (Collier et al. 2003, 156) as the conventional conflict-development model predicts. Manufacturing and commercial agriculture both grew rapidly throughout the 1950s, with overall economic growth averaging at 6.6%. These sectors benefited from the accelerated dispossession of the peasantry resulting from widespread violence. Usurped lands served the expansion of agribusiness projects particularly in the departments of Tolima, Cudinamarca, and Valle de Cauca, while the displaced filled both rural and urban demands for cheap wage labour. Rapid proletarianisation combined with the violent repression of unions contributed to a 15% decline in rural sector salaries between 1948 and 1958, to the advantage of capital accumulation (Fajardo 1983, 72-80). Capitalist development and violent conflict went hand in hand.

Counterinsurgency and Developmentalism in the 1960s-1970s

Following the installation of the National Front, the remaining insurgents lost the official backing of the Liberal party which began to refer to them as *bandoleros* or bandits- a derogatory term initially only used by the Conservatives.¹⁰ Many rebel groups, in turn, presented their struggle as an 'organized form of territorial resistance supported by poor peasants and colonizers' (Reyes 2009, 28), in an attempt to distinguish themselves from itinerant looters. Landlords deployed their own private militias, often aided by the army or the police, to terrorize peasant communities. The use of

¹⁰ Please note: the nature of this 'banditry' varies greatly across space and time. For a more detailed and precise account of this complex period in Colombian history, see: Sánchez and Meertens' 2001 study.

mercenaries, known as *pájaros*, to usurp land, also became common, particularly in regions of rapid agricultural commercialisation such as Quindio and Valle (Sánchez and Meertens 2001).

Paramilitary groups were legitimated in 1965 and 1968 as part of the counterinsurgency initiative Plan LAZO/LASO (Latin American Security Operation)- under the direction of US specialists and officials. US military involvement in Colombia increased significantly during the 1950s and 60s, making it 'the first country in Latin America to adopt US CI [counterinsurgency] measures' and 'one of the largest recipients of US military aid and training throughout the Cold War' (Stokes 2005, 5). In 1964, a counterinsurgency operation was launched to retake control of the areas known as the 'independent republics'- peasant resistance communities that had been formed in the regions of Cauca, Huila and Tolima during *La Violencia* and which had rejected amnesty, becoming self-governing Communist and radical Liberal enclaves. The military attacks forced the communities to scatter, but some members regrouped and with the support of the Communist Party formed the FARC or the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (1964/6-present). At the same time, a group of students and academics founded the ELN (1964/6-present) or the National Liberation Army (Stokes 2005, 73; Livingstone 2003, 68). These two groups, relatively small at their inception, would later become central players in the Colombian conflict.¹¹

Counterinsurgency is about 'winning hearts and minds'. Thus, the Alliance for Progress, inaugurated in 1961 under US President JF Kennedy in response to the Cuban/Communist threat, was the socio-economic counterpart to the military initiatives. The types of projects implemented under the plan reflect the ideology of the developmentalist period and the strong influence of the Latin American 'structuralist' or ECLA school, which understood many of the region's economic problems to be linked to unequal agrarian structures controlled by a powerful and conservative landowning elite. As a result, agrarian policies, including redistributive land reform, were regarded as key to both encouraging economic development and dispelling the threat of socialism (Brittain 2005, 339-40); thus development and security were strategically combined early in the conflict.

In this context the Colombian government passed the 1961 Agrarian Social Reform Law. A special government body was created, INCORA (Colombian Institute for Agrarian Reform), to administer the law. Under intense pressure from landowning classes, the government chose to focus on facilitating the colonization of untitled lands rather than intervening with established private property. The priority was to allay rural conflicts; over half of INCORA's projects took place in the so called 'red zones' corresponding to guerrilla and military presence. By the end of the decade, 96% of the new titles granted were for public lands and areas of recent colonisation. Often

¹¹ Many other guerrilla groups have operated in Colombia (EPL, Quintin Lame, M-19). However, for the purpose of this article, most discussions will focus on the FARC and occasionally the ELN, which are the two largest and longest standing insurgent armies in Colombia.

INCORA granted claims for large landholdings even in the 'new settlement regions'; thus unequal land distribution was in some areas 'extended' by 'the titling program'. Support for production growth and productivity improvements through rural infrastructural projects, credit programs, and technical aid, also tended to favour commercial estates over smallholders (Felstehausen 1971, 167-75; Fajardo 1983, 102-5; Berry 2004, 12). The agrarian reform program was clearly aimed at containing what counterinsurgency doctrines refer to as 'growing pains' (Clemis 2009, 164), i.e. conflicts arising as part of the development process itself, but evidently not at promoting a genuine transformation of unequal rural structures.

Throughout the 1960s, USAID, the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank all provided development assistance to Colombia with the explicit priority of supporting the development of commercial export crops. This was reflected in loan allocation decisions: Colombia's first agricultural World Bank loan in 1949, followed by one in 1954 and another in 1966 were all designated for the commercial sector, cattle ranching and mechanisation programs, NOT for small-scale farming projects (Galli 1981, 36-45). In sharp contrast to the ideas espoused by the ECLA scholars, a report published as part of the first ever International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (now the World Bank) mission in 1950, argued that small-scale agricultural production in Colombia constituted a 'mal-use, misuse and under-use' of both land and labour. Lauchlin Currie, the director of the mission and author of the report, favoured a development model based on the expansion of large agribusiness and 'accelerated' migration from rural to urban areas (Brittain 2005, 340-2).

This was precisely the type of agrarian transition that had been taking place. Even in the context of agrarian reform, both international and national forces continued to prioritize the 'modernization of the hacienda' in their policy decisions. Mechanization, which had kicked off in the 1950s, expanded with the support of foreign and domestic subsidies. Vast tracts of flat lands were transformed into labour-saving commercial estates producing sugar cane, cotton, rice and sesame. In the second half of the sixties, state credit programs increased their support for commercial export projects (933% in African palm production, 821% for soya and 607% for cotton). The value of production represented by large-scale commercial agriculture (defined by mechanization, salaried workers, and sizeable input costs) increased from 13.4% of the total in 1950 to 42.6% in 1976 (Fajardo 1983, 87-8, 109-22).

The expansion of agricultural exports, which grew by an average of 8.7% a year throughout the 1960s, had problematic corollaries in domestic food production. Prices of staple goods rose rapidly; by the close of the decade, three-quarters of Colombian families used half of their income to purchase foodstuff (Galli 1981, 70-1). Apart from contributing to a national food crisis, the rapid dissolution of the peasantry was driving massive rural-urban migration with which industrial

employment could not keep up. The rate of population growth in urban areas was more than double employment growth. Job opportunities within agriculture were also declining as a result of increased mechanization and the expansion of livestock grazing activities- often themselves responses to labour mobilisation (Felstehausen 1971, 177). New 'peasant leagues' were forming all across the country and there was a potent revolutionary threat from the recently formed guerrilla groups. Reformism once more became an apparent political necessity. President Carlos Lleras Restrepo (1966-1970) wanted to intensify and expand INCORA's work (including compulsory land redistribution in areas of traditional *latifundio*), but his proposals were resisted by the congress and the landowning class it represented. The bill that was finally passed in 1968 was limited (Zamosc 1986, 47-50). Just as in 1936 and in 1961, the landowning class managed to dilute agrarian reform into a meaningless bureaucratic gesture.

Lleras had realized that the thrust for comprehensive agrarian reform could not come from inside the political establishment. In order to 'balance against the excessive political weight' of the *latifundistas* (Reyes 2009, 32), he created a national association of users of state agricultural services (ANUC) as an organisational platform so that peasants could channel agrarian struggles through political structures.¹² However, the Conservative Misael Pastrana Borrero (1970-1974)¹³ did not share the reformist sentiment espoused by his predecessor. The new government declared the land invasions¹⁴ a 'subversion of public order', purged state institutions of reform sympathizers, and launched a 'counteroffensive' marked by accounts of torture, kidnapping, murder and collective detentions. Pastrana's 'Four Strategies' economic plan, devised with the assistance of Lauchlin Currie, considered 'traditional peasant production' to be a major 'obstacle' to national development (Fajardo 1982, 121). In early 1972, in a meeting held between members of the Liberal and Conservative parties and private sector representatives, it was agreed that in return for estate taxes, the government would guarantee firm restrictions on land expropriation and continue to provide extensive financial and institutional support for large-scale agriculture. The Pact of Chicoral, as it was known, was according to Zamosc 'a formal declaration of agrarian counterreform' (1986, 98).

The National Front officially ended with the inauguration of the Liberal López Michelsen (1974-1978), who swore his loyalty to counterreform. Many of the few *haciendas* acquired by the government in earlier reform years were returned to their original owners, while the armed forces were used to liquidate protests and social movements (Reyes 2009, 29). The country's long history of government repression is closely tied to the influence of US counterinsurgency policy which 'has

¹² For a detailed explanation of the rise and decline of ANUC, see: Zamosc (1986).

¹³ Many claimed that the 1970 elections were fraudulent; this led to the creation of the M-19 or 'April 19th movement' guerrilla group, named after the date of the elections.

¹⁴ Between 1971 and 1975 ANUC organized the invasion of around 2,000 haciendas (Reyes 2009, 28-32).

sought to insulate the Colombian state from popular pressures for reform' through 'widespread and pervasive state terrorism' (Stokes 2005, 78). In the Cold War context reformism was a necessity and yet in Colombia it had strict boundaries established by the interests of US hegemony and domestic ruling classes: the right balance had to be struck between the necessary concessions and maintaining control. A new reformist compromise was built around Integrated Rural Development or *Desarrollo Rural Integrado* (DRI).

The shift to DRI was part of a wider change in global policy outlook that saw rural development programs as a substitute for land redistribution. International agencies were eager to show that the transfer of green revolution technology to smallholders was a viable means of alleviating rural poverty. The World Bank, the Food and Agricultural Organisation, and the Inter-American Development Bank all provided support for the implementation of DRI in Colombia. The main objectives of the program were to boost salaries by improving productivity in staple food production, forge links between the peasant economy and wider markets, and extend social service provisions in rural areas.¹⁵ Participants were not simply to be drawn into capitalist markets as suppliers of food goods, but as consumers of agricultural inputs, technology, and credit. 'Beneficiaries' were encouraged to adopt new types of seeds, pesticides and fertilizers with costs as much as 575% higher than the customary production investment; costs that were covered by bank loans. The peasant economy, which still accounted for 44% of agricultural production, presented an underexploited market opportunity for multinational agribusiness and financial institutions. On the other hand, the provision of social services (health care, education programs, food handouts) played a key role in placating rural communities. A stable 'semi-proletarianized' peasantry guaranteed a cheap and flexible labour force for expanding agribusiness. In fact, a World Bank report on the DRI project openly expressed the expectation that income from the land would be complemented by seasonal work on commercial estates (Galli 1981, 60-87; Fajardo 1983, 125-41). According to Galli (1981), the objective of the DRI in Colombia was not to promote a genuine transformation of *minifundia* production, but to ensure that commercialisation and land-concentration could proceed with minimal disruption.

ANUC denounced López's counterreformist and repressive policies while arguing that DRI was not the solution to the peasantry's problems. It was clear that the government was not willing to renegotiate land redistribution and a new campaign of land invasion and mass rallies ensued. The government responded by stepping up state terror and repression. Eventually, a number of factors, especially ideological differences, led to the disintegration of ANUC, which by the end of the decade had clearly failed to establish a path of agrarian development that favoured the peasantry (Zamosc 1986, 179-202). For decades, import substitution policies had been used to protect an

¹⁵ The outcome of the DRI project varied massively between different regions, see: Fajardo (1983) or Galli (1981).

agrarian sector monopolized by a landowning elite that benefited from scarcity and rising prices. The powerful landowner's guild SAC (Sociedad de Agricultores de Colombia) had managed to divert state development resources to their advantage while comparatively very little government support was provided for smallholder agriculture (Fajardo 1983). At the same time, land concentration remained extremely high despite various agrarian reform legislations.¹⁶ Thus, for Colombia's rural underclasses, developmentalism was never the 'golden age' it was supposed to be.

Arguably, disillusionment with the failures of ANUC and the repressive and violent responses to pacific resistance contributed to the growth of armed struggle, which up to this point had mostly been indiscernible. Reyes directly associates the expansion of guerrilla groups with the defeat of the peasant movement at the end of the 1970s. He argues that the era represents a 'turning point': the moment in which the central government turned over its responsibility for resolving social conflict to armed groups (2009, 29-33).

The Drug Economy and the Consolidation of Armed Groups in the Global Neoliberal Era

Colombia entered the eighties, like so many other countries, in a state of economic decline: by 1982 GDP growth had fallen to 1.5% compared to a 6.1% average between 1970 and 1978. According to Fajardo, land concentration (monopoly land rents accounting for 15-20% of agricultural production costs) and increased dependency on foreign technology (also a large percentile of production costs, variable according to the crop) had caused a structural agrarian crisis (Fajardo 1983, 151-7). The declining profitability of legal crops was perhaps one causal factor in the rapid shift to marijuana and coca cultivation. The emergence of the cocaine industry changed the dynamics of the conflict in a number of key ways. First, it gave birth to a new group of actors in the conflict: what Richani (2002) calls the 'narcobourgeoisie' and Reyes (2009) refers to as Colombia's 'new elite'. Second, it provided a source of finance for the guerrillas, who also acquired a new role as regulators of the cultivation of illicit crops which had made the sustenance of the peasant economy more viable in the colonisation zones. Fourth, it was part of the impetus for the growth of paramilitarism with close ties to the drug cartels. Fifth, it contributed to the explosion of violence in both rural and

¹⁶ Colombia's first Agricultural Census in 1960 revealed extreme inequalities in landownership. 2,761 estates each with over 1,000 hectares dominated 30% of arable land, while 756,605 parcels of less than 5 hectares occupied just 4.5% of arable land. Overall, 75.8% of arable land was occupied by 6.8% of landowners on estates larger than 50 hectares, while 76.5% of landowners with smallholdings of less than 10 hectares were confined to just 8.7% of arable land. Medium sized farms (between 10 and 50 hectares) represented just 16.7% of landholdings and 15.5% of the land surface. By 1970 all categories of large estates (more than 50 hectares) increased in number (e.g. those of over 1,000 hectares reached 3,467), while all categories of smallholdings (less than 10 hectares) decreased in number. Medium sized farms increased in number, from 16.7% to 18.5% of total landholdings; however, their occupation of total arable land fell slightly (by .5%). Estates larger than 50 hectares, now representing 8.3% of landholdings, occupied 77.8% of arable land, while smallholdings of less than 10 hectares, accounting for 73.2% of landholdings, occupied 7.2% of arable land. There were changes in arable land surface during this period as a result of colonization of the agricultural frontier. For a more detailed overview of the data, see Fajardo (1983).

urban areas.¹⁷ Finally, it further complicated the legitimacy of an already shaky political establishment.

The quick formation of the illegal drug economy in Colombia was facilitated by the existence of large numbers of impoverished people in marginalized rural areas. This was a consequence of the path of agrarian development outlined above, which combined labour-saving technology and cattle ranching activities with violent efforts to dispossess the peasantry, pushing them into frontier lands outside the reaches of state control- the ideal location for illicit crops. The FARC did not encourage the cultivation of coca, but reluctantly ‘decided to accept the activity’ (Gutiérrez 2004, 265), perhaps in part because it could offer no viable alternative to the peasants to augment their incomes. The FARC began to mediate relations between the narcotraffickers and the peasants/rural labourers who cultivated the coca. However, it is important to emphasize that ‘with or without the insurgency, for the small farmers of these regions the cultivation of the primary material for drugs is a necessity’ (Sánchez 2001, 31).

The ‘coca boom’ not only provided a boost to the peasant economy, but also to the financial position of the FARC who profited from the taxes they applied to the illicit industry. The new income, at least in part, explains the strengthening and expansion of the armed group. During this period, the FARC expanded its operations into areas of *latifundio*/agribusiness and regions of natural resource wealth where the potential for increasing ‘protection rents’ was high, it set up strategic fronts near medium/large cities and small towns, and followed the migratory movements linked to the ‘coca rush’ into new colonization zones (Richani 2002, 75-80). Confrontations with the army, massacres, extortion, pillaging, and attacks on infrastructure all increased significantly during this time period. According to Gutiérrez (2004), around 1978 there was a shift from earlier eras defined by ‘guerrillas without war’ to an epoch of outright ‘war’. Nevertheless, Gutiérrez also warns that although the income from the illicit drugs industry undeniably has a key role in the FARC’s finances and therefore the scale and durability of its fighting capacity, often this relationship is oversimplified, pointing out that ‘the organizational take off of the FARC *preceded* its becoming a full-fledged warlord of coca territories’ while reminding us that the group also ‘amasses huge resources through kidnapping, racketeering, and extortion’ (2004, 265-6). Other financing methods notwithstanding, over time, the guerrilla’s links to the cocaine industry multiplied.¹⁸

¹⁷ The nature of the violence that plagues Colombia’s largest cities can not be discussed at any length in this article, due to space constraints. For a description and explanation of urban violence, see for example: Sánchez (2001).

¹⁸ The exact terms of guerrilla involvement in the cocaine business is unclear. While some analysts claim that the insurgency itself has become a narcotrafficking venture, others maintain that the guerrillas regulate and tax the industry, but do not run the show. Either way, it is clear that the involvement of the FARC and the ELN in the illicit drugs market has had a corrosive effect on their political project.

The more offensive stance adopted by the FARC provoked a response from businessmen, large landowners, sectors of the military, narcotraffickers, and even sometimes local and regional political elites, and that response was to form new and strengthen existing paramilitary organisations. The historical antecedent of contemporary paramilitarism in Colombia was the use of private militias and hired gunmen by landowners since the beginning of the 20th century. Paramilitary groups had also played an important role in the earlier counterinsurgency efforts of the 1960s. However, it wasn't until the early 1980s that paramilitary groups became visible and central actors in the conflict.

In defiance of the peace process initiated by Belisario Betancur (1982-1986), the army called on businessmen and landowners from the regions most affected by guerrilla activity to provide economic support for 'self-defense groups'. The decision of the Colombian armed forces was implicitly supported by the US government which continued to provide counterinsurgency training and sent 50 million dollars worth of military aid in 1984 alone- the year of the ceasefire (Stokes 2005, 71-8). Initially, autonomous paramilitary groups formed at local and regional levels. The nature of these groups varied; some were armed squadrons controlled by the drugs cartels, others resembled clandestine military counter-insurgency projects, while others still fit better into the description of 'self-defense' militias set up by local elites (Reyes 2009). According to Fernando Cubides, 'the term 'paramilitaries' [...] captures the essence of the amalgam' of groups described above. He argues that 'even if not all of the paramilitaries were originally self-defense groups, all the remaining self-defense groups turned into paramilitaries after 1989', after which, he points out, trying to distinguish between the different types of groups becomes futile (2001, 131).

In 1997, the Castaño brothers led the many regional paramilitary groups to unite under the umbrella organization, Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia or AUC (Livingston 2003, 77-8). Despite their diverse origins, what united these groups was their mission to eliminate the insurgency, which 'within the CI discourse promulgated by US CI strategists [...] was defined so broadly as to encompass practically any form of dissent' (Stokes 2005, 78). Thus, paramilitary groups terrorized the civilian population: massacring peasant communities accused of collaborating with the guerrillas and carrying out assassination campaigns targeting individuals in both rural and urban areas suspected of sympathizing with the insurgency (Stokes 2005, 74-7). This forcefully undermined democratic paths to resolving the country's conflict,¹⁹ and opened the door to some of the worst years of violence.²⁰

¹⁹ For example: the assassination of over 3,000 members of the Patriotic Union or UP political party (established by the FARC as part of Betancur's efforts to get insurgent groups to give up their arms for political participation) over a decade.

²⁰ There were approximately 60,000 recorded violent deaths (80% civilians) between 1985 and 2003 (Livingstone 2003).

The result of the consolidation of paramilitarism combined with the growing force of the narco trafficking business was increased land concentration or what some observers refer to as the second and third phase of agrarian counterreform from the 1980s until the present (Caballero 2008). As noted by Cubides, 'there is an impressive correlation between the growth of huge agricultural estates as a result of the investment of drug money and the growth of paramilitary groups' (2001, 132). The 'narcobourgeoisie' or 'new elite' is said to have acquired more land – 4.4 million hectares by the mid nineties - in just a few years than INCORA distributed in thirty (Richani 2002, 33-4). This process of violent land usurpation and its links to capitalist accumulation will be discussed at greater length in the following section of the article.

Rapid social changes in the agrarian sector were matched by macroeconomic shifts that also impacted rural conflict. Compelled by the global transition to neoliberalism, in 1990 the Colombian government initiated a process of economic liberalisation known as the *apertura* or economic opening. Non-tariff trade barriers were removed immediately, while average agricultural sector tariffs were reduced gradually from 31.5% to 15% between 1991 and 1993. Deregulation of financial markets encouraged massive inflows of foreign capital that led to a rapid appreciation of the peso, undermining the price competitiveness of Colombian exports. Between 1990 and 1997 overall agricultural output growth marked historical lows, while for some crops it declined massively (e.g. barley, cotton, soybeans, sorghum, and wheat). The declining rate of returns for certain crops caused many estates to be converted into cattle pasture (Jaramillo 2001, 822-38). While the number of hectares planted with coca expanded from 37,500 in 1991 to 163,300 in 2000 (UNODC 2006, 81).

Total agricultural imports increased by an annual average of 23% during the same period, with particularly devastating consequences for cotton production. The agrarian crisis that followed liberalization prompted large landowners, represented by the SAC, to launch a campaign pressuring for renewed state intervention. The government to a great extent acceded to demands, announcing an 'emergency' recovery effort including refinancing for distressed agribusiness and special tariff treatment for 'politically sensitive crops'. Increased incentives such as export subsidies provided for the expanded production of palm oil, sugarcane, flower and bananas throughout the 1990s. The agricultural sector remained central to the national economy; accounting for over 30% of national employment and more than a third of foreign exchange earnings by the end of the decade (Jaramillo 2001, 822-38; Richani 2002, 96). On the whole, the Colombian government continued to provide support for the commercial agricultural sector in the neoliberal period, just as it had throughout the developmentalist era, albeit a change in crop emphasis receptive to global market opportunities. Given that sugar, banana and palm oil agribusiness have proven links with paramilitary groups, and

are located in regions of intense land conflict (Richani 2002, 145), government incentives for export-led development have apparently become entangled in the violent conflict.

This was the setting for the third and most recent endeavour to implement agrarian reform, which had returned to the global development agenda in the 1990s (after losing popularity in the 1970s) in the form of ‘negotiated land reform’ or ‘market-led agrarian reform’ (MLAR). Negotiated land reform is based on pro-market principles: it assumes that problems of corrupt and inefficient bureaucracy can be overcome by limiting state involvement and that conflictual expropriation methods should be completely abandoned and replaced with voluntary transactions in which land is bought and sold for immediate cash payments at market prices (Borras 2003, 367-77). The emphasis is on developing markets; thus ‘MLAR is integrally and intimately intertwined with expanded commodification [...] and hence the status of land as an alienable commodity’ (Akram-Lodhi, Kay, and Borras 2009, 231). Colombia once again became a ‘testing ground for international agency projects.’²¹ Law 160 of 1994 provided the legislative foundations for market-led land reform. By 2000, only 10% of the planned 1 million hectares had been distributed. According to Borras, because of participation requirements, the beneficiaries of the programme were mostly ‘rich peasants’ or the ‘agrarian bourgeoisie’ (2003, 381). Extreme overpricing was a telltale sign of the corruption that enveloped the program. In 1996 the World Bank intervened in an attempt to remedy what they saw as the defects in the Colombian application of MLAR and tested their own version in a number of pilot projects. This was the first time the World Bank had provided financing explicitly dedicated to the purpose of land reform in Colombia (Mondragón 2006). The projects never got past the ‘pilot’ stage.

The market-led approach to land reform seriously understates the role of social and political factors shaping the agrarian problem. The ‘market value’ of land in Colombia frequently exceeds its productive value as a result of the speculative accumulation described above. The negotiation process envisaged by MLAR proponents involves ‘voluntary land transfers based on negotiation between buyers and sellers’ (Deininger 1999, 651). This stands in contrast to the reality reflected by the well-known Colombian paramilitary aphorism: ‘If you don’t sell, we will negotiate with your widow’. In sum, the agrarian reform project of the 1990s was implemented in accordance with the ‘Pact of Chicoral’, which two decades earlier had vetoed the possibility of carrying out *a genuine* agrarian reform. Meanwhile, the violent agrarian counter-reform described briefly above, continued into the new century. Despite the publicized process of ‘transitional justice’, the Uribe

²¹ Galli referred to Colombia as a “testing ground” noting that Colombia was the first developing country to accept a World Bank mission, apply for US ‘Alliance for Progress’ aid, receive counterinsurgency support from the US ‘Military Assistance Program’ and to implement the WB’s model of ‘rural development on a large scale’ (1981, 28).

administration (2002-2010) did little to address the violent agrarian problems inherited from the nation's history.

IV- ÁLVARO URIBE AND AGRARIAN COUNTERREFORM

The 21st century in Colombia has been defined in many ways by the presidency of Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010) who is best known for his hard-line military stance. According to government sources, military offensives have reduced FARC insurgent numbers from an estimated 20,000 in 2001 to 8,000 in 2008. With a significant measure of success, the Uribe administration has focused its efforts on establishing the state's monopoly of the use violence and expanding its territorial control. The guerrilla groups have been forced out of the main economic zone; the triangle formed by Colombia's three main cities: Cali, Medellin and Bogota (Semana 2008a). The reduction in violence in this densely populated area in part explains Uribe's popularity.

And yet the legitimacy of the administration has been undermined by a number of factors: the use of bribery to secure the constitutional amendment for President Uribe's re-election, the implication of one-third of congress in the parapolitics scandal,²² the blatant human rights abuses committed by the state's armed forces,²³ and the use of intensive surveillance against human rights activists, judges, lawyers, journalists, left-leaning academics, NGO workers, labour leaders and members of the political opposition (Semana 2008c; Semana 2009c).²⁴

Still, the Uribe administration received widespread recognition for the formal paramilitary 'demobilisation' process under the Justice and Peace Law (JPL) of 2005, 'the first transitional justice law in Colombia's history' (ICG 2006). Through the JPL it is alleged that approximately 40,000 combatants have demobilized since 2005 (World Bank 2009).²⁵ The head of the Colombian armed forces recently assured the public that the country's internal conflict has reached 'the end of the end' (The Economist 2008). The logic of the conventional conflict-development nexus would suggest that these security triumphs account for impressive economic achievements in recent years such as increasing annual GDP growth and the expansion of national exports.²⁶ However, a closer look reveals the continued role of paramilitary groups in facilitating capitalist development. The

²² Extensive agreements made between paramilitary groups and politicians were unveiled in 2006.

²³ For example: The 'falsos positivos' are civilians (mostly young men from poor neighbourhoods) who were 'disappeared' then murdered by the army to later be presented as dead insurgents in order to improve combat statistics. Over 900 cases which occurred between 2007 and 2008 and another 716 denouncements are being investigated (Semana 2009a).

²⁴ The success of the avid Uribista Juan Manuel Santos in the recent presidential race suggests that for the electorate these issues are secondary to the great advances made in the countries security.

²⁵ A questionable figure, since according to other sources, this many paramilitary members never even existed and very few of the demobilised guerrillas have been accepted for JPL proceedings.

²⁶ Colombia's GDP Growth was 5.2% in 2005, 6.9% in 2006 and 7.5% in 2007 (World Bank 2008) while value of exports expanded from \$12.0 billion in 2002 to \$21.2 billion in 2005 (World Bank 2007).

use of violence to accumulate land and repress labour has proved particularly favourable to domestic and foreign agribusinesses.

*Paramilitary Violence and the Agrarian Counter-reform: Dispossession by Displacement*²⁷

In spite of the favourable reports of enhanced security, there were between 3.3 million and 4.9 million internally displaced people in Colombia as of January 2010.²⁸ A large portion of this displacement occurred during Uribe's time in office and while the demobilisation process was ongoing: according to government figures between 2002 and 2009 over 2.5 million people were forcibly displaced (Acción Social 2010). Displacement is often an incidental consequence of conflict, but in Colombia it is frequently the purpose of the violence (Mondragón 2006). While both paramilitary and guerrilla groups are responsible for displacement (in varying proportions depending on the region), the latter have not shown an interest in amassing land. Paramilitaries, in contrast, have acted as 'armed companies of territorial conquest' (Reyes 2009, 114), seeking to control key trading routes related to the illicit drugs industry, monopolize zones where extractive industries operate (most notably petroleum, gold, emeralds, and coal)- usually in favour of foreign investors, and accumulate property for speculative and investment purposes, often as a means of laundering drug money. The usurped lands are converted into cattle grazing pastures, tourism projects, and most notably agribusiness estates (Reyes 2009). By 2005 less than 0.4% of landowners controlled at least 61% of arable land, while 97% of landowners occupied just 24% (Benítez 2005). A leader of the 'Bloque Metro' squadron confirmed outright that the drug traffickers and paramilitaries together were implementing 'a great agrarian counterreform' (Mingorance 2006, 43), from which both national and international private enterprise would benefit.

Paramilitaries themselves have argued that they play a positive role in the economy; that the 'security' they provide promotes domestic and foreign investment. The infamous AUC chief, Carlos Castaño, called his group 'the defenders of business freedom' (Stokes 2003, 377). Export agribusinesses in particular are known to have strong ties with paramilitary groups. To mention just two of the more high-profile cases: in 2007 the multinational Chiquita Brands was fined \$25 million by the US Justice Department for making monthly payments to Colombian paramilitary groups for over six years (José Alvear Restrepo Lawyer's Collective 2008), while Multifruits, the company that supplies the multinational Del Monte, grows its crops on land illegally obtained through paramilitary intimidation (Bajak 2006).

²⁷ A term originally used by Araghi (2009).

²⁸ According to the Codhes SIDHES information system over 4.9 million Colombians have been forcibly displaced (Codhes 2010). The government figure of 3.3 million cases (Acción Social 2010) of displacement is widely recognised as an underestimation. A survey conducted by the Constitutional Court found that only 65% of IDPs were registered within the government system (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre 2009).

The government body ‘Social Action’ estimated that 6.8 million hectares of land had been usurped as of 2006 (Government Press Release 2006a), the majority of which were originally smallholdings or part of collective territories belonging to indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities (Reyes 2009). The ‘land of blood and fire’ (Sánchez 2009) is appropriated through a number of different mechanisms. Typically paramilitaries have used massacres or selective assassination campaigns to cause mass exodus. In some cases forged documents were created to legitimize the new occupancy. Frequently, government officials collaborated in the ‘legalisation’ of pillaged lands.²⁹ In other cases land titles were transferred under coercion; usually sold at extremely low prices or without payment at all. In these instances the appearance of legality complicates the restitution process (Semana 2009b).

So far only 1% of the usurped land has been handed over to the Reparation Fund through the JPL (El Espectador 2009a). In some areas paramilitary groups never demobilized in the first place, while in others they have rearmed. The official discourse calls the armed groups ‘*bandas emergentes*’ suggesting that they are new drug cartels exclusively dedicated to narcotrafficking (Codhes 2009, 7). By labelling the new armed groups ‘narcotraffickers’ the government is able to negate the political nature of the violence and present the JPL as a success. Allegedly demobilized paramilitaries have actually ‘consolidated political hegemony [...] and economic power [...] especially in the area of tenancy and use of the land’ (Codhes 2009, 7). Often commandeered territories are sold on to businesses or held by front-men whose ‘property rights’ are ensured by private and public security forces. Thus, a number of displaced people who tried to return home in 2008 were forcibly removed by the police under the order of the ‘new owners’ (La Verdad Abierta 2009). A 2009 news report is tellingly subtitled: ‘The victims that reclaim their land are being assassinated, tortured and threatened. Reparation is failing and a bloody agrarian counterreform is consolidated’ (Semana 2009b).

The Uribe Administration’s Treatment of the Agrarian Problem

In 2004 the President announced the initiation of a ‘genuine agrarian reform.’ Lands seized by the state from narcotraffickers were promised to ‘poor families and displaced peoples’ (Government Press Release 2004). However, the government’s discourse of ‘genuine agrarian reform’ contrasted

²⁹ For example, in 2003, in the region of Magdalena, the local INCORA/INCODER officer revoked a number of land titles which had been granted over twenty years before, claiming that loan quotas were not being paid and land was abandoned. The official documents contain no explanation for the abandonment of the land, although it is highly unlikely that the local INCODER authorities were unaware that it had been overtaken by paramilitaries. Indeed another document from the national INCODER office stated that it was impossible to inspect the land in the areas due to paramilitary presence. Nevertheless, new titles were granted. The new owners un-coincidentally appeared on a list written by the paramilitary chief of the region which was found within a box full of documents (including a large number of land titles) confiscated by the military in 2006. A number of demobilised paramilitaries, now free citizens, currently occupy some of these farms (La Verdad Abierta 2009).

sharply with its actions, which were much more in line with the limited interests of the agrarian elite that President Uribe is frequently accused of representing (Navarro 2007). In 2003 Uribe liquidated INCORA (the Colombian Institute for Agrarian Reform) and replaced it with INCODER (Colombian Institute for Rural Development). The Colombian Attorney General stated that ‘The elimination of Incora was not a mere act of administrative reform [...] the message that seems to underlie the decision is the indefinite postponement of the primary aim of implementing a genuine and just agrarian reform in Colombia’ (Government Press Release 2005b).

The new agency (INCODER) operates under the reform law passed in 1994 which is still in effect (Benítez 2005, 54) and is based on the MLAR model of ‘voluntary negotiations’. Government officials continue to emphasize ‘markets and competitiveness’ despite widespread recognition that speculative land investments have in many areas caused the market value of the land to be above its productive value. Overvaluation of land may be so severe that ‘there is no legal activity which could generate the new levels of rent necessary to cover the cost of the land’ (Benítez 2005, 53). Nevertheless, INCODER beneficiaries are selected through a competitive process in which they have to present a viable ‘productive project proposal’. In response to the comment that these selection processes are ‘complicated for the average *campesino*’, the directors stated: ‘we have to use our resources wisely’ (Gutiérrez 2008). In order to understand what is meant by ‘wise’ use of the resources, let us consider the instructive ‘Carimagua Scandal’. In 2004 President Uribe made a public promise to break up a 17,000 hectare *hacienda* and distribute the land among 800 families who had lost their own due to conflict. In 2008 the Ministry of Agriculture announced that the land would instead be leased to a number of agribusinesses. The government defended the decision; arguing that little would come of the land if it was broken up into plots of 11 hectares and that agribusiness investments would provide better income and employment generation possibilities. Eventually the land was granted to Ecopetrol as a 50 year concession for an agro-industry project for producing ethanol (Semana 2008d).

In 2009 the press unveiled yet another scandal in which regional politicians, large landowners, powerful businesses, and even beauty queens each received sums of thousands of millions of pesos in government subsidies. The ‘Agro Ingreso Seguro’ or ‘Agricultural Income Security’ program that was allegedly created to ‘promote productivity and competitiveness, reduce inequality in the countryside and prepare the agriculture and livestock sectors to confront the challenge of the internationalisation of the economy’ (Cambio 2009) is accused of representing ‘a clear pro-rich bias’ (El Espectador 2009c), and is surrounded by corruption allegations. Just one well-known

family received over 2,200 million pesos (approximately 1,175,000 USD)³⁰ from the public purse for ‘irrigation and drainage’ projects (Cambio 2009).

Uribe’s National Development Plan (PND) reiterates that state subsidies should not be provided on the basis of need, but rather according to criteria of productivity and profit potential. The PND emphasizes the growth and competitiveness of the agricultural sector as a key motor of national development (Ley 1151 2007). Critics of the PND argue that it advances an ‘exclusionary development model’ founded on neoliberal principles. The rural development legislation, which backs the PND, allows for the expropriation of those lands that have not been exploited by their owners for the last five years. Thus, many have claimed that the legislation serves as a tool for ‘legitimising forced displacement’ and legalising usurped lands (CAJAR 2007). The Rural Development Statute, after being approved by Congress in June 2007, was eventually rejected by the Constitutional Court, in part because of the government’s failure to consult with indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities (El Espectador 2009b). Nevertheless, this has not hindered the implementation of the ‘model of development’ it proposed, as evidenced by the expansion of palm oil projects.

Palm Oil as Development: The Case of Chocó

One of the most publicized controversies surrounding current land tenure issues relates to the take over of communal lands by palm oil companies in the department of Chocó in the region of Urabá. The Urabá region has suffered from violent conflicts for decades: over logging, mining, bananas, and now palm oil. At the end of 1996 the army and the paramilitaries launched a joint offensive known as ‘Operation Genesis’ to drive the guerrillas out of the region. The operation that included tactics such as aerial bombardment, massacre, forced disappearances, and torture caused approximately 17,000 people to flee the area (IDMC 2007).

After the major military confrontations abated, people began to return to their homes, but found their land covered in palm oil trees fenced with menacing ‘Private Property’ signs. Urapalma was one of the first palm oil companies with activity in the area; by 2004 the company had acquired 5,654 hectares. Eight other palm oil companies now occupy lands in the region. The army and the paramilitaries continued to patrol the area; threatening those who tried to resettle on their land. In September 2006 the National Attorney General’s Office publicly questioned the inaction of INCODER and the Ministry of Agriculture in relation to agro-industrial activity in conflict zones. The Advisory Council to the Government was summoned to establish the extent of collective territorial rights in Chocó. The Council responded by affirming the rights of the Afro-Colombian communities over the land in question. Soon after, the Minister of Agriculture acknowledged that

³⁰ Exchange rates COP-USD July 2010.

at least 25,000 hectares of palm oil cultivation in the area of the Jiguamiandó and Curvaradó river basin did not have legitimate titles for the land (Quevedo and Laverde 2008).

In 2007 official investigations began; 23 palm oil entrepreneurs and a number of government officials are accused of involvement in the usurpation of land in Chocó. The dossier from the ongoing proceedings reveals a number of disturbing facts. First, paramilitary groups participated directly in negotiations with palm oil companies. In many cases people were forced to sell their land under threat. In other cases public and private documents relating to the acquisition of the land were forged. One paramilitary chief stated openly: ‘in the region of Urabá we have palm oil crops. I myself found the businessmen to invest in these projects which are durable and productive’. Second, the 17th Brigade of the National Army not only provided security for the industries, but was also involved in pressuring landowners to sell to the companies. Some members of the brigade even held shares in the ventures. Third, the regional government body in charge of environmental protection did nothing to stop the imposition of the monoculture in forested areas and allowed the companies to carry on without an environmental license. Fourth, a number of INCODER staff allegedly ‘permitted or encouraged these actions of dispossession’. Finally, the Superintendent of Private Security gave multiple permits to the companies allowing them to hire firms to ‘protect’ their businesses (Quevedo and Laverde 2008).

In sum, the palm oil dossier confirms the trinity of interests formed by certain sections of the state, the paramilitaries, and an agribusiness elite. In fact, often one person may be all three at once. These three powers, together, are violently imposing a particular type of agrarian development. Interestingly, notions of ‘progress’ and ‘development’ are commonly used in justifications given by the accused palm oil businesses; one man stated, for example: ‘forced displacement was not the fault of the palm oil businesses, whose only driving interest is to make the region a prosperous place [...] one of the most worrying things is that they attack the palm oil projects without proposing another formula for progress in the region’ (Quevedo and Laverde 2008).

The Chocó palm oil scandal is often presented as an isolated and unfortunate incident (Carroll 2008). However, the problems associated with the palm oil industry are not exclusive to the region. Research conducted by the NGO Human Rights Everywhere (HREV) documents illegal appropriation of land by methods such as usurpation through forced displacement, use of fraudulent documents, and purchase of land through armed coercion, plus the use of the palm businesses to launder drug money, in all six of the different regional palm complexes in Colombia. The report concludes that human rights violations do not occur as ‘isolated cases at one company or plantation, but are [...] an integral part of the production model’ (Mingorance 2006, 24).

Under the auspices of the JPL, the government has ordered the restitution of land illegally acquired in the context of the conflict. However, in the Jiguamiandó y Curvaradó river basin, this

process has been blocked: as of April of 2009, only 6% of the usurped land in the area had been returned to its owners. In 2007 INCODER passed a resolution that detached 3,000 hectares from the collective territories (IDMC 2007). Victims of displacement who try to return to their lands suffer intimidation and violence, despite supposed demobilisation of paramilitaries in the area (PBI 2008). Meanwhile, palm oil projects have been integrated into the paramilitary demobilisation-reintegration program: 'not only is it proposed that the victims and the aggressors should work together 'in the interests of reconciliation' but in some cases the victims have to work as employees on farms which were once their property' (Mingorance 2006, 41).

For many the palm tree has become a symbol of terror and injustice; for others the same tree is an icon of Colombia's potential for economic growth. By 2005, Colombia was the fifth largest palm oil exporter in the world (Mingorance 2006, 12). Anticipating that global demand will rise as biofuels become more popular, the government has promoted the expansion of the palm oil industry as a great development opportunity for the country. President Uribe stated that palm oil production exemplifies the country's commitment to sustainable environmentally-friendly development (Government Press Release 2005a), even though it has been labelled 'the most destructive crop on earth' (Monbiot 2005).

International development agencies are supportive of the government's plans. The Colombian Agribusiness Partnership Program or CAPP, a joint initiative of USAID and the Colombian Government, claims that private sector ventures in the agricultural industry will provide alternative livelihoods for rural communities and will help to eradicate illicit crops (ARD 2004). A 2005 USAID report on the program (CAPP) includes Urapalma (one of the companies under investigation for links to land usurpation) and a number of other palm oil companies on its list of 'projects in implementation' (USAID 2005). Urapalma did not actually receive USAID grant money because at the second-to-last stage of the application process it didn't submit all the necessary paperwork, including - significantly - land titles. USAID did grant, however, Gradesa (a palm oil refinery company) \$257,000 in 2003. Gradesa, it is alleged, had links to a project in Chocó in the contested territory, though USAID denies it. The company has also been entangled with drug trafficking interests: in 2005 it was revealed that two of the board members, who jointly owned a 50% stake in the firm, had laundered drug money through the business. Despite this, in 2007 Gradesa received a second grant of \$400,000 from USAID. In another case, USAID granted \$161,000 to Coproagrosur in 2004. In May 2009, it was divulged that the paramilitary officer Macaco had directed the development of the palm project. The donors claim that the paramilitary was not listed as one of the official owners of the business and therefore could not have known that they were inadvertently sponsoring paramilitary and drug trafficking activity. Ironically, the USAID grant was part of a Plan Colombia counter-narcotics project (Ballvé 2009). In sum, there is a clear

tension between the idea that economic development and growth contribute to peace and the violent reality of the imposition of export-led growth projects in Colombia.

Agrarian Counterreform as Primitive Accumulation

This 'bloody counterreform' fits Cramer's definition of primitive accumulation as 'a twin process of forceful asset accumulation and displacement of people' (2006, 217). It also supports his claim that contemporary conflicts are shaped by integration into the global capitalist system since the 'primitive accumulation' described above is influenced by the interests of export agribusiness and the global food system for which it produces. In the case of Colombian agrarian counterreform, some of the land has been accumulated for purely speculative purposes. In this instance, primitive accumulation impacts negatively on productivity. However, in many cases usurped lands have been transformed into infrastructure, tourism, resource extraction, or agribusiness projects; which in terms of profitability, economic growth, export earnings and other capitalist notions of progress, count as development. The agrarian counterreform, then, is an example of the violence of *capitalist* development.

But if we accept 'primitive accumulation' as a facet of capitalist development, does that imply that Colombia's bloody agrarian counterreform should be accepted as part of progress? The answer is no, primarily because of the subjectivity of the concept of progress discussed earlier. In order to avoid implicitly condoning the violent persecution of the lower rural classes, it is necessary to reject the normative claim of productivism, which understands the development of the productive forces to be a desirable process *at all costs*. It also means denying, as McMichael put it, that an 'assault on rural cultures is inevitable or desirable' (1997, 648).

Cramer (2006) himself argues that there is 'no guarantee' that primitive accumulation will lead to a successful transformation to a 'dynamic capitalism' that 'generates improving material conditions' for the general population. In his view primitive accumulation has three major functions. The first, which relates to the contribution of the usurped lands to capitalist accumulation, is occurring in Colombia in so far as the lands acquired through the counterreform are the sites of new agribusiness, natural resource extraction, or other types of profitable projects. In terms of the second function, the creation of a wage labour force, the displaced in Colombia have successfully been detached from the means of production and thus made dependent on the wage labour market for their survival. However, the market on which they have been made dependent has not been able to provide for their subsistence. Over 60% of displaced families suffer food insecurity and over 95% live in 'inadequate housing' (IDMC 2009). According to one investigation, 'the displaced in Colombia live worse than the poor and the indigents' (Caracol 2007). The dispossessed are not being absorbed into the proletariat class; they remain at the

margins of society, stigmatized by their label as ‘the displaced’. As emphasized by Araghi (2009), ‘depeasantization’ does not necessarily correspond to ‘proletarianization’.

This brings us back to Bernstein’s ‘new agrarian question of labour’ based on the crisis of employment. Urban unemployment in Colombia’s 13 largest cities between 2001 and 2009 ranged from a low of 11.5% to a high of 18.2%; while national underemployment has vacillated around 30% over the last decade (DANE 2010). Bernstein (2004) put forward the possibility that the urban employment crisis would be partially offset by the growth of employment within capitalist agriculture, particularly jobs offered by the export agribusiness sector. Indeed, this has been the promise of Uribe and the Colombian state in justifying the model of development it is pursuing. However, whether or not these new employment opportunities in the agribusiness sector will generate visible income benefits and contribute to the alleviation of poverty is another question still. De Janvry’s (1981) notion of ‘socially disarticulated accumulation’ suggests that export-led growth (whether it creates jobs or not) is unlikely to be the impetus for the improvement of the material wellbeing of the majority. In fact, the competitiveness of Colombian agribusiness depends heavily on the flexibility of the labour force, which in turn entails employment insecurity (e.g. seasonal unemployment) and low wages. Moreover, the growing disparity between ‘export and peasant subsectors’, as highlighted by Akram-Lodhi, Kay and Borras (2009), tends to buttress exclusionary agrarian development. Finally, based on the aforementioned, the third function of primitive accumulation: the expansion of the national market, does not appear to be fulfilled by the current primitive accumulation process in Colombia.

As well as creating new forms of poverty, ongoing capitalist development in Colombia brings forth issues relating to McMichael’s (2009) concern with how the global food regime undermines environmental and food security. The adverse ecological impacts of the imposition of monoculture plantations, particularly palm oil, are well documented elsewhere (GRAIN 2006; Suárez and Emanuelli 2009). In terms of food security, the total number of undernourished people in Colombia rose from 4.2 million to 4.3 million between 2000 and 2006 (FAO 2009). Food price inflation averaged 13% in 2008 compared to 7.6% inflation in the overall national economy; this is not unrelated to the replacement of food crops with biofuel projects (Ibañez and Muñoz 2009). In 2009, President Uribe made a public call for producers and retailers to lower food prices, arguing that soaring food costs were seriously hurting the poorest segments of the population (Alsema 2009). The bitter irony of this is evident: Uribe has consistently encouraged the prioritisation of production for export at the expense of national food needs.

According to conventional development theories, increased productivity in agriculture lowers reproduction costs of labour (i.e. better technology means cheaper food and therefore lower wages) but because technological investments in Colombia have tended to favour the production of export-

goods for foreign consumption over the production of food for national consumption, food prices are not decreasing. In the past, the reproduction costs of wage labour in rural areas were in part covered by their own subsistence production, as noted by De Janvry (1981) and Galli (1981), but the agrarian counterreform has undermined this by dispossessing people of their land. At the same time, the smallholder/peasant economy which in the past was the main provider of the food required by urban labour has been slowly destroyed. Instead of repressing wages through economic mechanisms, violence is used to guarantee a low cost labour force.

Repression of Social Protest through Armed Violence

Labour and more generally popular social movements are often controlled, like land, through violence. Colombia has the unfortunate reputation of being ‘one of world’s most dangerous places for trade unionists’ (Amnesty International 2007a). Amnesty International documented over 2,000 murders and 138 disappearances of union leaders and members in Colombia over the past two decades (2007b, 1). Both paramilitary groups (accounting for 49% of abuses) and state forces (accounting for 43%) use terror to repress protests: ‘human rights violations [...] coincide with periods of labour unrest or negotiations over working conditions’ (Amnesty International 2007b, 1-3). Observations of the consistent persecution of unionists led one analyst to claim that ‘the competitiveness of Colombian palm oil [is] based on a reduction in labour costs through armed violence’ (Mingorance 2006, 46).

Aside from its dealings in the ‘dirty war’, the government delegitimises labour, peasant, indigenous, and other movements through ‘smear campaigns’ that paint social leaders as guerrilla terrorists. For example, in October 2008 over 12,000 indigenous protestors blockaded the Pan-American Highway demanding an end to the violence perpetrated against their communities, change in government policies, and the restitution of ancestral lands. The government responded by deploying state forces claiming that the protests were infiltrated by the FARC, and a number of protestors were killed by police bullets (Semana 2008e, 2008f).

At the same time, popular social struggles are less and less the concern of guerrilla groups which increasingly use extortion and terror against the civilian population from which they are supposed to seek support.³¹ According to Reyes, there is an ‘inverse relationship’ between the FARC’s expanding military might and its representation of the ‘popular sectors’ of society, particularly in relation to agrarian conflicts (2009,3). Overall, the armed insurgency has seriously

³¹ For example: In 2004 the FARC admitted to massacring 34 coca farmers which it accused of supporting right-wing paramilitary groups (BBC 2004), while in 2009, the massacre of 17 members of the Awa tribe was attributed to FARC retaliation for their collaboration with the army (McDermott 2009). For a more detailed account of FARC’s contemporary strategies refer to: (ICG 2009)

undermined nonviolent channels of resistance. Hopes for the future must lie in the ability of social leaders to unite what Bernstein (2009) calls ‘fragmented classes of labour’.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Colombia’s violent conflict has been created by a complex web of issues with the nation’s agrarian development at its centre. In the beginning of the 20th century, the growth of the Colombian coffee export sector incited the first phase of conflict. The new market presented an opportunity for *campesinos* whose independent participation in the economy was seen as a threat by the traditional landowning elite. The failure of the state to arbitrate in agrarian conflict, largely due to the unwillingness of the traditional ruling classes to make economic and political concessions, entrenched the use of violence in struggles over the terms of development. In later phases of the conflict, the state took a more active role in protecting and promoting the interests of the traditional landowning elite. Successive governments under both the Liberal and Conservative parties validated the landlord or junker path of agrarian change by providing financial and institutional support for the conversion of *latifundios* into capitalist estates and by deploying state forces and sanctioning landowners’ use of private militias in order to repress resistance. Groups of armed ‘self-defense’ communities formed as an attempt to assert the viability of smallholder production, sowing the seeds of the guerrilla insurgency. Violence forced many peasants into growing urban centres, while others fled to colonization zones. The displacement and marginalisation of large numbers of *campesinos* to frontier lands beyond the reaches of state control was conducive to the establishment of an illicit drug economy. Although Colombia’s violence, as has been shown, began long before the drugs trade and for reasons often ignored in contemporary commentary, the profits made in the drug economy allowed for the military strengthening of armed groups and transformed the conflict in many ways.

The ongoing dissolution of the peasantry created a reserve army of labour that could not be absorbed by sluggish urban industrialisation and became quite literally a reserve army in the conflict. The meagre reform gestures made by the state in response to the agrarian problem only exacerbated rural crisis. Likewise, international development agency interventions (policy, projects, and aid) have consistently aggravated economic and political contradictions in the agrarian sector, while US military initiatives, at all stages of the conflict, reinforced the use of repressive violence. The use of force and terror against both violent and non-violent challenges to the landlord path of development further consolidated armed resistance. As Colombian journalist Antonio Caballero (2008) succinctly put it: the policy of ‘the dominant class in Colombia [...] consisted in treating the agrarian problem with bullets’. In the 21st century, violence has been used to secure a political economy that supports the profit interests of an agrarian elite that are in line with the global

neoliberal development agenda. The presence of MNCs and the logic of global commodity markets entrenched exclusionary patterns of accumulation which generate grievances that are expressed through both organized (rebellion) and unorganized (criminal) violence. Meanwhile, the elitist nature of the Colombian political system diminishes possibilities for these issues to be addressed through democratic opposition and negotiation.

Many contemporary theories of civil conflict provide inadequate explications of the violence in Colombia because they fail to address a key driving force: long-standing agrarian struggles arising from the development of capitalism. Contrary to the claim that ‘the armed conflict in Colombia constitutes the central and greatest obstacle to development’ (Arnson 2004, 1), capitalist development may actually be an obstacle to peace in the country. The application of the conventional formulation of the conflict-development nexus to Colombia is rejected on the grounds that a) capitalist development is often imposed through violent means and b) capitalist development generates poverty and inequality that fuel violence. For some, Colombia may be just an outlier on a statistical graph: a strange case where a protracted internal conflict has co-existed with economic growth, but a closer examination reveals much about the relationship between capitalist development and violent conflict.

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